

Back Again, Back Again: A Ruined Palace for a Ruined King

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirteen:
A ruined palace for a ruined king.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: In the market square before the castle, hair tucked into a scarf, I listened to the vendors and asked almost-too-many questions of my own. *Did you hear, did you hear, the palace burned?*

Everyone knows that, said a gray and wrinkled woman, not unkindly, packing honey-soaked nuts into a small paper funnel. *The tyrants broke in and set everything ablaze. Terrible, terrible thing.*

Did you hear, I hummed, this time to a man who sold rings inlaid with tiny, clear mirrors and long swaths of silken fabric, *did you hear, the palace burned?*

The man, this time, laughed. *Serves the kings right. They always underpay. Tithes, they call it. I say theft.*

I pressed the advantage. Carefully, I fingered a rich plum fabric, woven through with gold in forks like lighting, like tree branches, and said, *this is beautiful. It would suit well my wife.*

He eyed me up and down. *Is she pale as you? It wouldn't, if so.*

I laughed. *No. She's not. Trust me, it would. How much per armlength?*

As he consulted his ledger, I said, as flippantly as I could manage without stumbling over my words, *it is very unfair. What the kings do to you. Do they still come, with the palace burned?*

He didn't look up, too busy flipping through sheets of ink-stained paper. *Yes. Not as often. They stay in the noble house of something-or-other. Laerd* - he shook his head. *A pale boy. Like you. Like - the new poet.* He looked up, sharply. *You are not from the Far Shore, too, no?*

No, I said quickly, not sure what sort of prejudice I'd nearly ignited in this man. Maybe I really liked expensive silks. Maybe he chronically underpaid this man. Neither would have surprised me. *No. I am from this shore.* Knowing full well I could not afford anything at his table - especially not

something as fine as gold-woven fabric – I bowed shortly and said, *I think you are right. This color would not suit my wife after all.*

Who was the pale boy? The only one that came to my mind was the boy who had always stayed late after court, the one that caught Cassian up in long strings of conversation as I'd tried not to sulk by his side, ready to be out of my fancy dresses. Maybe. Maybe. I didn't know his name. I didn't know where he lived, either.

I kept walking. I kept talking, posing questions, inventing lovers and birthdays and births and burials as excuses for my lingering.

The prince waits at the palace, whispered the merchants. *It is the place he knows the eligida can run back to.*

Even though it is burned? I asked, my breath hitching.

The stone still stands, said one man, looking proud. *The castle is half stone. We are not finished yet.*

Even though it is burned, he lurks, he lingers, cackled one woman. *A ruined palace for a ruined king.*

A ruined palace for a ruined king. A ruined palace for a ruined king. Did they tell the truth, these merchants in the king's square? Did Cassian really stay in the palace?

If he was, I had no doubt that it was Cassian who allowed these rumors to spread. He was clever enough to go where he

wanted disguised and undetected - these stories, if they were stories, had circulated at his volition.

A ruined palace for a ruined king. It was late afternoon, and the sun was already turning everything to gold. I couldn't afford to waste any more time.

I headed towards the castle. I headed towards Cassian.

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I approached through the forest. Our part of the palace, mine and Cassian's and Rhia's, was part of the stonework - towers and interestingly slanted roofs and turrets. Trellises that you could scale, with enough reason and enough determination.

I had plenty of both.

The merchants hadn't exaggerated the damage, though. The entire place still reeked like smoke. I climbed; I somehow managed to avoid seeing anyone else - most people, those with sense, had returned to their own estates or had followed the royal family to the house of the boy-laerd.

Was I surprised that Cassian lacked the sense to move on? No. Maybe. It was both so very *him* to stay - that same need to cling to people that I had, that urge to say *change as I do and in the same directions; I will hold on until then* - and so terribly *not*. He was a creature of logic, not of fancy, and this

entire thing struck me closer to a story than the devisings of a one-track prince.

But maybe that was the cynicism in me. Maybe that was me, expecting him to not change, either.

It was odd, the palace this empty. My heart was in my throat as I picked my way inside, crept through the scorched halls and slid around corners with one hand on my borrowed sword.

I saw no one. No one, as far as I was aware, saw me.

I made it to the place that had been Cassian's room. The door, though slightly blackened, still stood. I hesitated - *should I knock? Should I simply walk inside?* - before I got over myself and pushed it open.

It was - just as I remembered it. The fire hadn't gotten inside.

That was the part that hurt the most. I don't think I realized it until I'd crossed the threshold, but I think - I think I'd associated the palace burning with my leaving. You know - bridges, burned, castle, burned, *no, Ilyaas, nothing is the same and you cannot return, because even if you do, the life you knew is gone.*

And yet - bed. Tapestry of his family's crest. Desk and books scattered and scattered and scattered across every surface.

And - he wasn't inside. No Cassian.

I almost laughed at how trusting I'd been of the merchants. *He waits for you*, they'd said, without the *you*. I almost laughed at how much trust I'd placed upon Cassian. *He has nothing better to do except pine*, I hadn't really meant to think, but I had. Sometimes you forget that people's lives continue to turn when you leave them. He was a prince trying to control a country doing its very best to descend to chaos. He would not spend his days here.

At least - not all of them. Maybe he would come back, if I waited long enough. It was worth a try. It was the only plan that I had before we all had to take greater risks.

I wandered over to his desk. I flipped through his books, catching on pamphlets of strategy in dense Rhysean and silly adventure novels with drawn-out names and books I assumed were meant for children, similar to the Rhysean primers he'd given me, way back at the beginning of us, that instead were in - another language. Maybe whatever it was that was Io's native tongue? I realized, suddenly, that although it was an entire country, I didn't know the actual name for the Far Shore. Everyone here just - situated it in comparison to Rhysea. I assumed they didn't speak Rhysean. I guess, really, I hadn't know for sure.

I kept flipping as late-afternoon turned solidly into evening and tried not to stack the worry in my head into unstable towers. This was a change of plans, after all, what I'd embarked on. We still had a second route. It wasn't a good one - it was the best one we had, really, it was a fine one - but I didn't like where it situated me and where it situated Cassian. I didn't like the odds it left for Leander.

So I looked through books, instead. There was nothing better to do.

And then - at the bottom of one stack - I'd almost missed it - lay a... journal. Or, I'd thought it was a journal, at first glance. A thin piece of leather cord ran round it. Loose pages, extra pages, all worn smooth and wrinkled with time, stuck out of the edges and caught around the bindings.

Curious, I opened it.

I was greeted by - pages and pages and pages of - English. In different handwritings, different ink colors that stained funny, some of them that were so faded or so smudged they were nearly unreadable. It was familiar to me even though I'd never seen it before. It was strange, and I already felt like I'd knew what I'd find inside, and - It called to me - it was me - it was something devoid from me entirely.

But the English. The *English*. There was only one thing that could be.

This was - this was - the book. *The Book* - capitalized, emphasized, all of it. This was the book of prophecy, written by the old soldier and poet and king.

I scooped it up, flipping ravenously through the pages. The words *the boy* and *from beyond* and *the one that will start this again* - in a different handwriting, *call her what?* The first one, *Vatakina Eligida* - I swallowed, hard, nearly dropping the thing -

The door swung open behind me, and I heard something clatter to the ground. I tensed, dropping the book onto the desk and throwing one hand to Iolo's sword, but a voice, familiar and hoarse, stopped me dead.

Ilyaas? Cassian croaked, and my heart caught. I turned around, slowly, and smiled.

Hi, Cassian. I've missed you.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.